



# Coping with Disaster

## Tips for Older Adults

The terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., have had a profound effect on people of all generations across the country. Although everyone responds to such tragedy with varying degrees of grief, fear and anger, many older adults who have lived through previous tragedies and trauma may be at greater risk for experiencing symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder, depression, or anxiety.

### Some common responses to disaster:

- Disbelief and shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disorientation, apathy and emotional numbing
- Irritability and anger
- Sadness and depression
- Feeling powerless
- Over or under-eating
- Difficulty making decisions
- Crying for “no apparent reason”
- Headaches and stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Excessive alcohol or drug use

You may experience all or only a few of these responses. Over time, these symptoms and difficulties should begin to decrease as you re-focus attention on your daily activities. However, everyone experiences stress differently, so don't compare your progress with other people's or judge their reactions and emotions.

### How to cope in the aftermath of the disaster.

- Talk about the experience and how you are feeling. Expressing your thoughts with others gives you the opportunity to relieve stress, reduce anxiety, and realize that other people share your feelings.
- Communicate with loved ones often. Communicating with family and friends following a disaster helps increase feelings of safety and security.
- Take care of yourself physically. If exercise is a regular part of your routine, continue to exercise. It is also important to eat well, drink plenty of water, and rest.
- Be around others. Isolation and loneliness can increase the degree to which you experience symptoms. If you do not have a local network of family or friends to visit with often, find a place where you can be with people. Volunteer at a local non-profit, offer to speak at local schools about historical events you have experienced, contact local churches or senior centers to see if they are holding any activities that are of interest to you, or call your doctor or local mental health center to see if there is an older adults support group in your area that you could join. If you are unable to drive, do not hesitate to ask for a ride. Look into reduced. special taxi

fares for senior citizens, or take public transportation if you can.

- Do things you enjoy. If you have put things aside that you normally enjoy, get involved in those activities now. Go for that walk, plant flowers, or play cards with your friends.
- Write about significant experiences in your life and how they have affected you. Keeping a journal gives you the opportunity to express your feelings in your own words and at your own pace. It is also an opportunity for you to share pieces of your life with future generations.

It is important to return to your usual routine at your own pace; however, if your symptoms do not seem to be subsiding or if they appear to be getting worse, you may want to speak with a mental health professional. If you have already been diagnosed with a mental health disorder or if you find that you are distressed about traumatic events from your past, you may want to meet with a mental health professional as a precautionary measure. To find a mental health professional in your community, contact your primary care physician, a local mental health center, or your area Mental Health Association.

The National Mental Health Association (NMHA) has several resources available to help you and others cope with the disaster including *talking with kids*, *helping your workforce cope and return to work*, and fact sheets on post traumatic stress disorder, depression, coping with loss and other topics. To obtain this information, visit [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org) or call our toll-free line 800-969-6642.

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